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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000531

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SUBJECT: KOSTROMA: OPPOSITION GROUPS FAIL TO GAIN TRACTION

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Alice Wells. Reason: 1.4
(d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A visit to Kostroma revealed that opposition groups have been unable to gain traction in the region. United Russia dominates the political scene and long-standing opposition groups trail far behind in support. United Russia swept the January 25 mayoral elections and dominated the March 1 municipal elections in Kostroma. Ruling party dominance of the media and financial backers further skewed the political playing field in United Russia's favor. We saw little evidence that Russia's growing economic crisis was having a political impact in this ruling party-dominated town. End Summary.

¶2. (C) A February 24 visit to Kostroma, an historic Golden Ring city north of Moscow, revealed a region without effective opposition to the dominant United Russia. The Communist Party (KPRF), ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), Just Russia, and Yabloko trail far behind in public support. The new Kremlin-friendly Right Cause party and the opposition Solidarity movement both have little name recognition and scant membership. In the March 1 municipal elections, for instance, United Russia fielded candidates in six of the eight single-mandate district elections (for deputies to local parliaments and heads of municipal regions within the Kostroma region). Significantly, no opposition political parties ran head-to-head against United Russia. Only one opposition group, Just Russia, participated--but only in one of the elections in which United Russia was not involved.

United Russia Exerts Control

¶3. (C) Svetlana Komissarova, a journalist from the independent publisher "Provincial," told us that United Russia has dominated recent elections in Kostroma, and that "the opposition has no power." She told us that during the mayoral elections in January, in which United Russia won a landslide 91 percent of votes cast, many voters reported afterward that they had not even heard of any of the opposition candidates. Anna Skudayeva, a journalist who is based in Kostroma and writes for Moscow's Novaya Gazeta, voiced serious concern over the low (32 percent) voter turnout for the mayoral elections. Skudayeva stated that she feared the political system is heading toward a one-party system as during Soviet times. She argued that "there is no political interest and no real political struggle in Kostroma." In her opinion, everyone knew that a United Russia candidate would win the mayoral election.

¶4. (C) Following the previous governor's death in a car accident in 2007, Putin-nominated governor, Igor Slunyayev replaced Kostroma's outspoken Mayor Irina Pereverzeva with the more compliant Alexander Kudryavtsev. Nikolai Sorokin, representative of the Solidarity opposition group in Kostroma, noted that the authorities used "tried and true"

tactics to lure residents to the voting sites: selling cheap food, providing free busses, and giving young people free tickets to disco parties.

Weak Opposition Presence

15. (C) According to Komissarova, KPRF is slightly stronger than the other parties in Kostroma because it has a longer history and pensioners support it. KPRF and LDPR sometimes have peaceful gatherings in Kostroma, but Komissarova was unaware of any opposition political protests in the area. Skudayeva maintained that the opposition in Kostroma is very weak and that they are struggling to attract the attention of voters. She stated that opposition parties fight against each other in Kostroma and that United Russia adds pressure by provoking them.

16. (C) Mikhail Rummyantsev, the Right Cause representative in Kostroma, told us that his party will register soon and participate in the October 2009 oblast-wide elections in Kostroma. He stated that the opposition groups in Kostroma are weak because they do not have much financial backing. Since Right Cause appeals to businessmen who are able to contribute financially, he argued that his party will gain support, in addition to its existing 800 plus current contingent. He expects to attract even more supporters as the economic crisis worsens in Kostroma and voters begin to defect from United Russia. He acknowledged, however, that at present small and medium-sized businesses are afraid to join political parties since they fear government retribution.

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17. (C) Solidarity's Sorokin hopes to gather more supporters than the current 100 who had formally belonged to the Union of Right Forces (SPS) before its dissolution. Sorokin has been spreading literature from the Solidarity movement in Moscow and is planning a number of roundtable discussion groups. In order to express independent views, he also plans to launch a website in Kostroma. A visit to Solidarity's office revealed a run-down warehouse facility with three offices and a shabby conference room. One of the offices, in which two staff members appeared busy at work in front of ultra-modern computers, was filled with expensive, high-tech equipment. While Sorokin outlined a number of potential plans, he admitted that Solidarity is in the beginning phase, so the group is short on funding and has not had any concrete activities or achievements.

Media and Election Monitoring Obstacles

18. (C) Opposition parties in Kostroma are further hindered by lack of access to the media, according to Skudayeva. The local government has opened investigations into journalists in Kostroma, which forces them to spend hours in court as they struggle to show evidence that their stories are factual. Journalists often risk being fired for writing articles about controversial issues. Skudayeva stated that "no newspaper in Kostroma has press freedom." Right Cause's Rummyantsev added that people in Kostroma hardly follow the news and that they are not politically active, so they are easy to manipulate.

19. (C) In terms of observers, while any candidate has a right to have observers present at polling stations, Skudayeva told us that in practice the only observers are affiliated with United Russia. She alleged that officials threaten the voters that they will lose their jobs if they do not vote for United Russia. These threats are especially poignant during the economic crisis. Skudayeva described, how during the mayoral elections, 700 employees from the mayor's office were bussed to the election sites three days before the elections and were subsequently told how to vote and observed during the election process. She stated that

"there is no ability to vote in secret in Kostroma."

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Despite evidence of a mounting economic crisis nationwide, the prospects for opposition groups in Kostroma still appear bleak. Despite the initiative of new groups such as the Right Cause and the Solidarity Movement, United Russia will likely continue to dominate the playing field in Kostroma. Kostroma provides a clear example of United Russia's attention in cultivating strong support and media dominance in smaller cities where opposition is little, poorly funded, and far enough away from Moscow to receive attention or resources.

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